

# **Lehi Tabernacle**

## **By Richard Van Wagoner**

**In the dozen or so years that I lived abroad my mind frequently wandered back to Lehi, my boyhood home. A favorite memory was coming over the Point of the Mountain to be greeted by the sweeping splendor of Utah Valley, the lake, and the purple heights of Timpanogos. Jutting above Lehi's canopy of trees then was the alabaster like Gothic tower of the Lehi Tabernacle, which could be seen for miles around.**

**The history of the tabernacle (in my opinion Lehi's finest building over) began long before the structure was actually built. Despite the desire of townspeople to replace the inadequate Lehi Meeting House, the construction of the historic Utah Stake Tabernacle in Provo during the 1880s, with the financial demands on Lehi churchmen, pushed local concerns nearly twenty years into the future.**

**During an August 22, 1897 mass meeting, Bishop Cutler and his counselors were named to select the site for a new meeting house. Extensive discussion on the issue took place throughout the community. As always there was dissension between uptowners and downtowners. Uptown ers wanted it in the north end of town because they claimed Brigham Young "once said that the meeting hour for Lehi should be located on the State Road (present State Street)." Downtowners wanted it in the southern end of the community so they wouldn't have to walk as far to meetings.**

**Ultimately a central site was selected on the northeast corner of Second North and Center. After considering several architects, the building committee settled on the plans of Richard Kletting, who had designed Salt ari, Lehi's Central School, and who would later serve as architect for the Utah State Capitol Building.**

**Although excavation work on the tabernacle began in February 1900, progress on the building was excruciatingly slow. Lehi people were poor, and despite labor contributions, materials still had to be purchased with cash. Not until September 14, 1901, had enough work been completed to lay the main cornerstone on the southwest tower.**

**LDS Church President Lorenzo Snow was invited to lay the cornerstone but because of illness was unable to attend. The honor then was given to former Lehi Ward Bishop Thomas R. Cutler. After a lengthy prayer, melodious song by the choir and lively music by the Silver Band, Cutler ceremoniously wielded the silver trowel which had been hand-crafted by Lehi silversmith Abraham Gudmundsen.**

**Before the cornerstone was sealed up, a metal box, filled with numerous photographs, books, newspapers, and other artifacts was placed in a hollowed-out cavity of the stone. This memorabilia, along with the silver trowel, are now housed in the Hutchings Museum.**

**The Lehi Tabernacle was constructed of white pressed brick. The walls were 121 feet in length and 76 feet wide. The main auditorium was 80 feet by 80 feet and the main southwest tower, with an observation deck facing each point of the compass, was 112 feet high. Elias Jones supervised the masonry work, and Andrew Fjeld laid the last brick in April 1902. Monroe Wilson directed the outside carpentry work.**

**Work on the building had virtually ceased by the fall of 1904. Lehi people had once again been called upon to help build a stake tabernacle elsewhere. Many of the funds which could have been used to finish the Lehi Tabernacle were instead diverted to finishing the Alpine Stake Tabernacle in American Fork (Lehi Stake was not created until 1928).**

**Seriously concerned about the deterioration of the thus-far completed Lehi Tabernacle, a committee of Lehi men in the spring of 1905 called on**

**church president Joseph F. Smith. The group asked for and received an \$4,000 appropriation to push the building towards completion. This additional funding allowed Fred Merrill and William Turner to complete the plastering and carpenter John S. Willes to erect the rostrum, vestry and gallery. By late summer a crew of men began installing the 698 opera chairs on the floor of the auditorium. The building's meeting capacity, including the vestry and gallery, was 1,200.**

**The first meeting in the unfinished building was scheduled for Fast Sunday, September 3, 1905. A capacity crowd listened to addresses from Alpine Stake President Stephen L. Chipman, Bishop Thomas R. Cutler, apostle Reed Smoot, and President Joseph F. Smith. The audience was enthralled not only by the addresses, but by a pigeon which had flown in one of the open windows and circles around the huge auditorium until the close of the services.**

**The week preceding the first meeting James H. Gardner, George Webb, and Isaac Fox went to Salt Lake City and made arrangements for a pipe organ to be installed in the Tabernacle on a trial basis. This instrument proved to be unsatisfactory, as did the second organ tried. On October 19, 1906, the W.W. Kimball Organ company of Chicago shipped a \$3,700 pipe organ to Lehi. This nine-ton instrument contained over a thousand pipes, was nineteen feet high, eight feet thick, and twenty feet wide. After hearing it played, Lehi citizens claimed it rivaled even the famed tabernacle organ in Salt Lake City.**

**By early spring, 1910 the people's generous sacrifice of labor, energy and money were rewarded as the \$47,000 building was completed for dedication. Twelve hundred ninety-one people attended the May 15th services where the dedicatory prayer was offered by President Joseph F. Smith.**

**After ten years of maintaining the Tabernacle, Lehi's four bishops**

**came to the conclusion that the building was too expensive for them to operate. Because the facility was directly across the street from the site of the proposed high School, Alpine School District offered to purchase the building from the church for \$28,000. This offer was accepted.**

**When the Lehi Stake was created in 1928, local churchmen tried to convince Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon (who held the purse strings on building projects) to let the local congregation convert the Tabernacle into a stake center. Cannon declared the tabernacle “unsuitable” for Lehi’s needs, and advised that the remodeling costs would be prohibitive.**

**Instead of again becoming a church building, the Tabernacle became the armory of Lehi’s National Guard unit, which leased the basement from the Alpine School District. On the night of December 15-16, 1929, guardsman’s smouldering cigarette nearly burned the building down. By 1934, according to an editorial in the “Lehi Free Press”, the “Old Tabernacle...is falling into ruins with the windows boarded up and broken.”**

**On October 1, 1935, the Alpine School Board informed the Lehi Stake Presidency that unless they agreed to purchase the Tabernacle within two weeks, the building would be demolished and the property sold. Stake leaders again approached Bishop Cannon who advised them to request an appropriation from the First Presidency. This was successful and the building was repurchased for just \$500. Lehi Stake quarterly conference was held in the newly-remodeled Tabernacle (remodeling costs were \$42,000) on March 31, 1940.**

**The main Tabernacle auditorium with its comfortable theatre-styled seats, was the cultural center of Lehi. Most townspeople born before 1960 have a multitude of memories connected with the building. In addition to quarterly stake conferences, hundred of functions were held there. Organ recitals, choral performances, road shows, and Promised Valley productions entertained many. Along with Christmas cantatas were the popular “let’s**

**sing”programs where everyone in the community was invited to an evening of group choral singing. Civic and political gatherings, Father and sons banquets, Boy Scout Courts of Honor, seminary graduations and high school commencement exercises are recalled in fond reveries.**

**The basement of the building hosted numerous banquets, quilting bees, Sunday School classes, and Halloween parties. Those of us who attended Lehi High or Junior High School during the late 1950s (they were one school until 1959) remember taking band classes in this area. The horrid squeaks, blares, and yelps of those long-ago practice sessions still echo in our memories.**

**Lehi citizens were informed in early 1961 that the Tabernacle was going to be razed and a new Lehi stake Center built on the site. Mixed emotions ran high in the special stake priesthood meeting where the announcement was made. Several men opposed the building’s demolition. One brother so strongly believed in saving the much-loved place that he recommended moving it to another spot.**

**Despite considerable oppositions the decision to build the new stake house seemed irreversible. In August of 1962 demolition proceeded, and by mid-September virtually the entire building, except the main tower, had been razed. On the afternoon of September 18, a giant crane with a heavy wrecking block dangle from its top moved into position, signaling the final assault on the building. Much to the surprise of those who had declared the tower “unsafe,” it required considerable effort on part of the crane operator to bring the structure down.**

**The irony of the loss of the Lehi Tabernacle is that the Utah State Tabernacle in Provo and the Alpine Stake Tabernacle in American Fork, both built by large contributions of Lehi monies, have been preserved and wonderfully restored. While we cannot bring back our architecturally unique Tabernacle, the memory will soon live again in a monument to be erected on**

**its former site. The Lehi Stake presidency hope to complete the project on the southwest corner of the Lehi Stake Center within the next year.**